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THE POSSIBILITY OF GOD LANGUAGE:
A LINGUISTIC STUDY IN THE LIGHT OF THE NEW THEOLOGY

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of
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INTRODUCTION

Webster's defines a thesis as "a position or proposition that a person advances and offers to maintain by argument." That definition would be a little misleading if applied to this study because I really have no proposition, as such, to offer. I do not regard the present time as appropriate for the positing of any synthetic propositions about the possibility of language about God. Nevertheless we are faced with the question about that possibility in such a big way that we must begin to say something about the subject. The popularizers of the New Theology (notably bishops Robinson and Pike) regard one of the most pervasive problems of present day Christianity as being that of outmoded language, of insisting upon the retention of the "earthen vessels" in which the "treasure" is stored. The question of whether in a world come of age, an age of maturity, we are able or should want to use language about God,

is being seriously considered by many. I regard this questioning about language as just one part of the whole questioning of the God hypothesis. Yet, particularly among theologians, the issues must take verbal shape and therefore in many ways the problems about language become the prior problems. The whole "death of God" movement has its roots in the questions about language. Our confidence in our language about God is badly shaken. Therefore the problem of this thesis is, "How can we conceive of our language in such a way as to have confidence that it expresses what we want to express?" I do not want to mislead the reader into thinking that I have what could be regarded as a definitive answer to that question; I do not. However there are many attacks being made on God-language at present (many from within the theological circle) which I regard as being based on inadequate notions about both reality and language. I shall try to demonstrate those inadequacies. More positively, although we are not in a position today to enact synthetic solutions, there are indications of a growing segment of thought (much from outside of the theological circle) which

is pointing towards the direction from which the solutions are certainly going to come. I intend to try to persuade the reader of the new possibilities which are about to open up. I am sure that we are standing right on the edge of something tremendously exciting in theology and this study tries to point to the coming excitement.

I acknowledge with great thanks the theological needle of the Rev. Carl Norris Edwards, instructor in theology at the Episcopal Theological School, which he has used so skillfully over the past two years to cause the sort of discomfort which made the writing of this thesis a necessity. I also wish to thank my wife, Nini, without whose typing, patience and love this thesis would still be a vague intuition.

CHAPTER I

THE TEMPTATION TO JOIN THE POSITIVIST

"The whole sense of this book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly and what we cannot talk about we must consign to silence."

L. Wittgenstein

From preface to Tractatus Logico - Philosophicus

To illustrate his point that the chief problem with theological language is the impossibility of falsifying theological statements, Frederick Ferre (in Language, Logic And God) paraphrases a parable originally told by John Wisdom.

Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, "Some gardener must tend this plot." The other disagrees, "There is no gardener." So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. "But perhaps he is an invisible gardener." So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol it with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H. G. Wells The Invisible Man could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the believer is not convinced. "But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves." At last the sceptic despairs, "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?" 1

Nowhere is the temptation to join the positivist² more clearly illuminated than in Wisdom's parable. The parable is an adequate and artful expression of the objection of the logical positivist to the logic of theology, to God-language. In describing the positivists' attitude towards God-language, my approach will be to describe that attitude in terms of the frustrations which they experience from their encounter with that language. Insofar as every Christian of sensitivity often shares the same frustration, he knows the temptation to join the positivist. I shall maintain that, as the view of positivism (as particularly manifested in the language of science) grew to a place of high stature among philosophers, theological language received more and more scorn. This scorn was not really evoked by the picture of reality which the theologians were presenting (although that too was often dismissed as 'metaphysics'). In fact it was rare when positivists were able to get beyond the linguistic problem so that they might even consider the substance of the theologians' thinking. The scorn was largely the result of the frustrations of the positivist stemming from his inability to make

sense of theological language. That chiefly resulted from the theologian's unwillingness to be bound by the logical proprieties of positivist language. This frustration was supported pragmatically by the remarkable achievements of science (which subscribes at least in practice to the positivists' program) all of which seemed to be met by those in the theological camp if not with outright hostility, at least with notable indifference.³

There are two features to the parable which are particularly germane to the positivist objection to the language of theology, the second feature following directly from the first. The first objection is that the theologian (obviously the 'believer' in the parable) had no empirical means, i.e. by the use of the five senses. The second feature, inseparable from and more crucial than the first, is illustrated by the final despairing statement of the skeptic; "Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?" This objection rests upon the assumption that it is of no real consequence whether the believer's idea that

there is a gardener is true or false. Thus even if some way could be found of proving the believer wrong, (which is impossible because of the lack of empirical grounding for the belief) nothing significant about the situation would change. The conclusion then drawn is that the assertion "There is a gardener" is meaningless. Clearly the discomfort of the skeptic grew steadily as step by step, the believer equivocated away one empirical basis for his belief after another but never once exhibited the slightest doubt about the truth of the belief itself.

Insofar as the attitude of the believer in Wisdom's parable has characterized the attitude of theology, it is not difficult to understand the reason for the impact of positivisms' critique of theological language. It held center stage with the publishing of Ludwig Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico - Philosophicus in 1922 and with A. J. Ayer's much later work Language, Truth And Logic.⁴ The world, claimed Wittgenstein, divides not into things, but into facts and ultimately into a uniquely determined set of atomic facts. Further, he claimed in the Tractatus, each proposition ultimately resolves itself,

by analysis, into one uniquely determined truth-function of elementary propositions i.e. each proposition has one and only one final analysis. This thesis was seen as the final solution to all philosophical problems. The concept of atomic facts and the final analysis of each proposition were enthusiastically recieved as the answer to the philosophers' wish to break complexity down to its barest and simplest form. The real merit and contribution of positivism seemed to be that it did a thorough, honest job of what philosophy and theology had been attempting for a long time. By the method of reduction the positivist built a model of reality⁵ which was internally consistent and which was universally applicable. Therein lies the temptation to join the positivist. It is clear that one means of escape from an indefensible position such as that of the believer is to avoid categories which involve emotional decision and to remain instead within the bounds of an ultimately consistent logical system; that is the logical schema as well as the appeal of positivism. By proposing to consider systematically only language which does not involve emotional decision, positivism

promises linguistic certainty. Once one has asked the question "How do I know?" (and its logical successor, "How do I communicate what I know?"), he has embarked upon the quest for certainty about his language which the positivists regard as having been fulfilled in their linguistic system. The final unassailable rock upon which the positivist takes his stand is the demand, "Be logical!" by which he means, "verify that on the basis of the five senses." It is impossible to calculate the affect which was wrought upon the philosophical and theological communities by the convincing consistency of positivism. The positivist paid tribute to the demand for logical consistency by omitting from his systematic language any proposition which was not sensuously verifiable. At the same time he wished to impose the same logical statutes upon anyone who claimed to be saying something about reality. Although we insist that the positivist's language system is too narrow to service the needs of theology, nevertheless it is here that positivism performs a healthy, reforming service for theological language. If we are ever to conceive of our language in such a way as to have confidence that it expresses

what we want to express, we are going to have to take account of the logic by which people agree to have their language governed. Chaotic language deserves no serious hearing. We may claim another dimension of logic than is acknowledged by the positivist's system, but the fact that we do so does not give us license to ignore altogether the requirement for coherent communication. Credit ought to be given to positivism for requiring the theologians to face up to their responsibility to communicate with the rest of humanity.⁷

I have set out the grounds on which the theological community owes thanks to the positivists for their impact upon linguistic philosophy. Their insistence upon clarity and upon absolute fidelity to the bounds of empirical verification has recalled the theologian to the task of setting forth the rules by which his language is governed. But the theologian's temptation to claim that his language is faithful to the same bounds as that of the positivist fails to recognize what the positivists themselves have never been willing to recognize: the diversity of language. The assumption of the positivist is that language

functions on only one plane, the plane on which all things are empirically verifiable. Anything which does not conform to that plane is unverifiable and therefore logically meaningless.⁸

It is his fixation upon that which is empirically verifiable that is the greatest shortcoming of the positivists' position. In order to agree with all the points of the positivist, we must not only acknowledge that language functions only on that plane, but also that reality exists only on that plane. Peculiarly, when confronted with the charge that they limit reality to that which is empirically verifiable, the positivists are willing to acknowledge the fact that there may be a level of reality which is not dealt with in their system. However, they insist that language about that reality violates the purity of the logical system and must therefore not be engaged in.⁹ Thus they set an arbitrary logical limit beyond which their language will not go regardless of whether their experience transcends that limit. The result is a system of language which exhibits less interest in communicating the totality of experience than in the preservation of empirical verifiability and consistency.

The great failure of positivism, and the reason that it is inadequate to the language of the theologian, is that it consigns language which is not empirically verifiable to the categories of 'emotive' and 'meaningless.'

Positivists do not deny the reality of experience which transcends empirical categories; they deny the possibility of constructing significant language about that experience. No truth value may be assigned to statements within such a system. The problem with the positivist view of language, simply stated, is that it draws too tight a perimeter around the area of experience about which we can communicate with confidence that what we are expressing is significant. I certainly do not want to say that there is no reality apart from that which can be verified on the basis of our five senses; even the positivists themselves do not go that far. But I cannot be content, as the positivists claim they are, with a philosophy of language which tells us that there are parts of our experience about which we must not use language at all, or at least which we cannot use with confidence that what we are saying can be shown

in some way accurately to reflect reality. The positivist has seriously considered the problem of this thesis: "How can we conceive of our language in such a way as to have confidence that it expresses what we want to express?" He solves the problem by refusing to talk about anything which cannot be verified empirically. But surely this is a debilitating language system. Of what ultimate value is a language, no matter how logically pure and no matter how consistent, if it is unwilling to address the totality of experience? The necessity for empirical grounding and consistency may be demonstrable within certain disciplines, such as those bound by the scientific method (although questions need to be raised about this assumption too). But the positivists have made the grave error of equating the means and ends of their language with that of all language.

Is it possible to talk about the security which an infant finds in its mother's arm in such a way as to avoid having the language dismissed as 'emotive'? Undoubtedly yes, but the positivist would require empirical evidence of that security before acknowledging language about it as significant. Is

it possible to tell someone that you love him in such a way as to have confidence that he feels that your statement is significantly in touch with reality? I say yes, but the positivist rejoins that love-language cannot be verified because it has inadequate empirical grounding and therefore it must be logically neutral.¹⁰ I should emphasize here that it is an unfair criticism of the position of logical positivists to say that they do not acknowledge a dimension of reality other than that which is empirically grounded. It is not even fair to say that they will not permit communication about that dimension. They will. What they do intend is to undermine our confidence on the logical significance of language about such matters. This question illustrates the issue: "Can we have the same degree of confidence that the statement 'She loves me' is as accurate a reflection of reality, as the statement 'That is a chair'?" The positivist clearly must say "no." For my part I shall maintain that the first statement may be just as accurate a reflection of reality as the second. But the issue should be clear: if the positivist is correct then the theological community is indeed involved in a serious crisis of language, for it will

have been restricted to discussing a shadow of reality in a language undeserving of confidence. The positivist has not demanded that we cease our language altogether. He has merely asked that we not make the same claim of truth which he contends is being made by the scientist. He would ask us to agree that all language functions in a logically equivalent way and that the degree of confidence which we can have in our language is directly proportionate to the extent to which it is empirically verifiable.

The degree to which the positivist view of language has cowed the religious man's willingness to make statements which are not empirically verifiable is incalculable.¹¹ The notion that all language functions in a logically equivalent way has become a dominant one among us. Yet this would seem to be a result more of a split between our professional, academic activities and our non-professional "family" activities, than a necessity of the situation. For if we reflect for a moment upon the variety of ways in which almost any given word functions within ordinary language, we would recognize the inadequacy of the positivist position. A passage from Lewis

Carroll's Alice In Wonderland illustrates:

The King asks the messenger, "Who did you pass on the road as you were coming here?" "Why no one," replies the messenger. "Well, then you must be faster than no one," says the King. "On the contrary," protests the messenger, "no one is faster than I."

Such nonsense language as that provided by Carroll occurs only when the assumption is made that language can function on only one plane. And it is this assumption (mistaken as it is!) which constitutes the trap into which the positivists have fallen, and leads them further to contend that no confidence should be invested in any language which purports to reflect a non-empirical dimension of reality. Either contention seems to require that too great a price be paid for logical consistency and/or empirical grounding.

Positivism has exerted a very healthy influence upon religious language and that influence is mirrored in the articulation of the crisis found in the "New Theology."¹² For a long time theologians held such a low view of the significance of language that they engaged in all manner of metaphysical madness without feeling obligated to ask whether or not what they were saying was commensurate with reality.

Probably many still hold such a view. But with the rise of "secular society," accompanied by a growing interest in "facts," (i.e. language which is empirically grounded) the right of the theologian to use language indiscriminately has been strongly challenged. Thus the theologian feels the pressure to tighten up and clarify his language (or at least to state his view of how his language functions) if he expects to be taken seriously. One response to this pressure is to yield to the temptation to join the positivist on his own terms.¹³

But the problem at once arises that either one must say that there is no reality apart from that which is empirically grounded, or that he must surrender confidence in any language which may be constructed apart from that which is empirically grounded. I am unwilling to accept either alternative. Not only do I posit a dimension of reality apart from that which is empirically grounded, but I claim the same degree of confidence for language about that dimension as the positivist claims for his language. It remains for a later chapter to demonstrate my right to make such a claim, but I have tried to show in this

chapter that the positivist has produced an intolerably narrow definition of language. Empirical verification cannot stand as the sole means of testing reality.

FOOTNOTES

1 - Ferre Language, Logic & God p. 32. This parable appears time and again in works of linguistic analysts and is a particular favorite of logical positivists.

2 - Positivism is a philosophical system holding that theology and metaphysics belong to earlier imperfect, speculative modes of knowledge. Positive knowledge, it claims, is based on natural phenomena and their spatiotemporal properties and invariant relations or upon facts as elaborated and verified by the methods of the empirical sciences. (Webster's Third New International Dictionary; G. & C. Merriam & Co., Springfield, Mass., 1965). I recognize that there are many men who consider themselves positivists but who do not conform exactly to that definition. Nevertheless, I feel it gives a good statement of the basic position.

3 - I recognize, of course, that science, as such, does not subscribe to any particular school of philosophy. Philosophy serves to make sense of what is going on. However I subscribe to the thesis that philosophical positivism can be understood only in terms of the impact of the flourishing of natural science. The main concern of the positivists (although some positivists might be unwilling to acknowledge this today) was to provide the philosophical explanation for the possibility and development of natural sciences. Therefore I would think it valid to regard theologians' attitudes towards science as directly affecting and relating to their attitudes towards positivism. With the longstanding habit of

theology either to oppose or ignore the achievements of positivism, seen particularly in science, we shall deal at greater length in the last chapter. It is this obscurantism in the name of theology which has led many like Myron Bloy (The Crisis Of Cultural Change) and Harvey Cox (The Secular City) to charge that the Church has used the idea of a transcendent, unknowable God to oppose and hide from any aspect of secular society which refuses to make obeisances to God. Naturally in a study of this length we cannot deal with this phenomenon in any thorough or systematic way, but the implications of this conflict with science will be clear in Chapter Three.

4 - Although these two books are undoubtedly the highest representation of the position of the logical positivists, there are some other books which give a more understandable presentation of positivism and a very fine background for logical positivism. For a presentation of the position of the positivists there is no finer work than Frederick Ferre's Language, Logic And God (he calls the positivists 'verificational analysts'). Although it is not the most readable book it is thorough, particularly the section on logical positivism. For a very fine survey of what is going on across the board in linguistic philosophy on 'God-language', I refer the reader to Paul van Buren's The Secular Meaning of the Gospel. Van Buren's solution to the problem of religious language (a kind of mishmash of Ramsey's 'discernment commitment' situation and of Hare's 'Blik') is not convincing, but he has very carefully laid out all the alternatives before giving his own.

5 - The term "model of reality" may cause some perplexity to the reader. Whenever I use it, I mean it to refer to the way in which one 'sees' things. In a sense it stands as a substitute for the word 'truth' which I have intentionally avoided because of its implications. The problem with the term 'model of reality' is that it implies that there is no one way of looking at things which is more true than

another, one simply chooses a model, a set of glasses. Partially, in the sense that we do all see things through different glasses (a philosopher and a physicist look at the same phenomenon but 'see' very different things), I intend just that. But it is absurd to say that some models are not more commensurate with reality than others. They are. If they were not, the psychotic would not be psychotic.

6 - The ease with which logical positivists have been able to dismiss the language of even the most brilliant theologians is devastating. A fine example of this can be found in Ferre's presentation of the positivist's attitude towards theological language: "Factual meaning is lacking for theological statements because of theism's inherent violation of the requirement that all synthetic propositions be open in principle to verification or falsification by experience. And the logical contradictions within theological speech arise from the misguided attempt to discuss a pseudo-subject matter which inevitably leads all who will follow into paradox and incomprehensibility. The cause for this theological misuse of language is to be found in the emotion - for emotive meaning is the only "meaning" which theological discourse may claim." Frederick Ferre, Language, Logic And God, p. 32.

7 - It would make a fascinating sociological study to try to determine to what extent the professional theological community has ever really been able to rid itself of "gnosticism." Anyone who has ever spent any time in a theological school knows the frustration of trying to be a part of general discussions before learning the 'in-group' terminology. I would suggest that this is not due simply to the necessity for technical vocabulary in a complicated field. At least in part it is the same kind of intellectual pride which marked Gnosticism and which marks all fields of professional inquiry. (For a fascinating approach to one aspect of this

problem, see Gilbert Ryle's article, "Systematically Misleading Expressions" in Logic And Language, edited by Anthony F. N. Flew).

8 - The positivists' insistence upon this point is virtually unanimous. "The principle of verification is supposed to furnish a criterion by which it can be determined whether or not a sentence is literally meaningful." A. J. Ayer, Language, Truth And Logic, p. 5. Wittgenstein makes this supremely clear (in the Tractatus p. 27):

"The book will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking, or rather - not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought).

The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense."

Ian T. Ramsey (in Religious Language, p. 14) sets forth the reason why he feels the positivist rejects language which is not empirically verifiable, and more specifically language about God:

"Here is the falsification problem: what kind of talk can this talk about God be, if it permits us to use these descriptions in the face of any and all empirical phenomena?"

We could cite innumerable examples of philosophers who deal with this issue since all who even touch on the realm of linguistic philosophy do so. It is true however that there has been a mellowing of the verificational outlook. The positivists have generally acknowledged that apparently homogeneous language may exhibit all kinds of logical differences.

9 - Wittgenstein did not wish to deal with these matters in the Tractatus except to say that they were to be dealt with by mysticism for which he exhibited appropriate philosophical scorn. This presents a problem for Bertrand Russell even though he is also a logical positivist. In an introduction to the Tractatus, Russell writes:

"These difficulties suggest to my mind some such possibility as this: that every language has, as Mr. Wittgenstein says, a structure concerning which, in the language, nothing can be said, but that there may be another language dealing with the structure, and that to this hierarchy of languages there may be no limit."
(p. 23)

Frederick Ferre, who is not a positivist, says (in Language, Logic And God, pp. 42-45):

". . . verificational analysis narrows the meaning of 'fact' and 'factual' to contexts relevant to our empirical vocabulary alone . . . We shall not advance our understanding of theological language by making it analytically impossible - as does verificational analysis - for language to refer to any but scientific facts . . . we need not hold that the only legitimate definition of 'explanation' must be in terms of the methods of scientific explanation. That theological discourse has been shown to be untenable when interpreted as pseudo-scientific-explanation does not, it would appear, rule out the possibility of its functioning rationally and legitimately in some other way. Verificational analysis does not recognize any other way, but this may illustrate a shortcoming more in verificational analysis than in theological language."

The really remarkable thing, however, is to see the positivist acknowledging the reality of non-empirical phenomena but refusing to use language about it. Writes Ayer; (Language, Truth And Logic, p. 15)

"In putting forward the principle of verification as a criterion of meaning, I do not

overlook the fact that the word 'meaning' is commonly used in a variety of senses, and I do not wish to deny that in some of these senses a statement may properly be said to be meaningful even though it is neither analytic nor empirically verifiable."

And Ferre, (Language, Logic And God, p. 40)

" . . . the rejection of any but sense-experience for purposes of verification must not be taken as equivalent to the assertion of the highly improbable hypothesis that human experience is exhausted by sense experience. On the contrary, its purpose is to safeguard the objectivity of empirical truth."

10 - Professor A. T. Mollegan has written an article in the Seminary Journal of Virginia Theological Seminary in the December, 1965 issue, which illustrates my point about the problems of positivism (the title of the article is "Miracle, Myth, and Revelation in the New Testament"). Although the article is sometimes obscure, Mollegan clearly attacks the positivist assumption that language which is not empirically grounded is "emotive" and "insignificant." I reproduce one paragraph here for the reader's interest.

"In debate with some logical positivists and some positivists in an eastern university I had carefully ascertained beforehand that they were all married and after questioning them about their position for at least two hours, I said, 'I want to be very sure now that I understand you. You are all married and the project is to find out whether your wives love you or not. Now if I understand you, the positivists among you say that there is only one possible way to find out whether one's wife loves one or not. You observe her behavior over a fixed, predetermined period of time. You study this behavior. You come to the conclusion that her behavior will submit to the probably hypothesis that she does love you. Then, of course, this hypothesis might be tested for another period of time. And

while it may become a relatively demonstrable hypothesis it always remains in the realm of an hypothesis.' 'Yes,' they said, 'that's perfectly correct.' 'Now' I said, 'logical positivists are skeptical about even this.' 'Yes,' they said, 'that's right because everything degenerates into semantics, at least for certain schools of logical positivism.' So then I said, 'Now how would you, from this standpoint, differentiate between your wife loving you and her behaving as if she loved you for ulterior reasons. It might be the same behavior but not because she loved you, she acted as if she loved you but for some other reason.' 'O. K.' they said, 'you could not possibly do this.'"

Dr. Mollegan goes on to draw conclusions which I would not draw, but the reported conversation illustrates exactly the point I am trying to make.

11 - This sounds like a naive comment philosophically, but we should acknowledge that professional, academic philosophers make up a very small percentage of those who consider themselves religious. I am sure that the number of Christians who have had no formal theological or philosophical education and who know that the battle with logical positivism is really passe, is small indeed. As evidence for that fact, I would cite the reaction throughout Christendom to Bishop Robinson's Honest To God. I think it is clear that a large part of that reaction is to be found in Robinson's pointing out that it is empirically absurd in the space age to talk about God as being "out or up there." It never seems to have occurred either to the Bishop or to those who were so taken aback by his book that the statement "God is up there" might be anything other than the exact logical equivalent of "the satellite is up there."

12 - It is interesting that in the two volumes, New Theology, nos. 1 and 2, (edited by Martin E. Marty and Sean G. Pearman) no less than five articles bear directly on this very problem.

13 - I would argue that this is precisely what those whose thought is popularized by J. A. T. Robinson, are doing. Particularly noteworthy is the interest of the "New Theology" in casting off all speculation about God and concentrating instead upon Jesus. ("God is the One who is showing us that we can get along perfectly all right without him." Bonhoeffer) It strikes me that the significance of this movement away from God and towards Jesus, is at least in part, grounded in the idea that Jesus has empirical, "historical" context.

CHAPTER II

THE TEMPTATION TO GIVE UP GOD-LANGUAGE ALTOGETHER: A RESPONSE TO THE POSITIVISTS' ATTACK

"The Empiricist in us finds the heart of the difficulty not in what is said about God, but in the very talking about God at all."

Paul van Buren

The Secular Meaning of the Gospel p. 84

In Chapter One we saw that the chief attack upon theological language has been mounted by the positivists and those who have been influenced, either directly or indirectly, by them. I took the position that the philosophical problem arose not so much as a result of a denial of the reality which theology tried to describe, as of a denial of the possibility of constructing significant language about that reality. One important part of the theological community is sensitive to the positivists' charge, not only about God-language, but about the whole area on which theology has traditionally focused its attention.¹ The result has been that those from within the theological discipline who took up the challenge, have carried the implications much further than those which may have been envisioned by those from outside the discipline who made the initial charge. In this chapter I will deal with one response to the challenge of positivism which has altered the character of recent theology if not the content.² As the title of the chapter

suggests, I view the response dealt with in this chapter as one of the chief responses which theologians are tempted to make in the face of positivism. My method will be much the same as the method of the previous chapter: rather than produce a survey of this aspect of the New Theology, I attempt to make sense of this response in terms of the adequacies and inadequacies which it holds for God-language. My chief assumption of Chapter One remains; we want to be able to have confidence that our language about God expresses what we want it to express, and very many of us do not possess such confidence at present.

If one of the chief underminers of confidence in God-language is positivism, one theological response to positivism seems peculiarly appropriate. That response is to cease using language about God altogether. If it is a question of our right to claim systematic confidence in our language about God which brings scorn upon us, then what could disarm our opponents more than to give up language about God? Of course a serious question was posed inasmuch as it could be claimed that theology without God-language was totally anachronistic. But suppose it were

possible to raise the kinds of issues which we want to raise, while granting the positivists' their point about the elusive nature of God-language, would we not then have met the requirements of both sides?

If this seems like a radical alternative, in many ways it is the most radical imaginable. For many reasons³ we feel that our right to use God-language has been more severely challenged than ever before. If this is true on the academic theological level, it is even more true on the popular level. The unwillingness of lay Christians to put their ideas about God into language is so widespread today that we often hear homiletical use made of St. Paul's phrase "fools for Christ's sake" to express the scorn received by those who verbalize their faith. It has been the case for some time that lay Christians have been silent about God, but the silence advocated by academic theologians with regard to God, is a relatively recent phenomenon. This might be an interesting and unusual case of an idea breaking out first on the popular level and only later being picked up academically. In many ways that is what occurred throughout what is

known as the "secularist" movement in Christian theology. (In fact that is one of the things which the secularists are most angry about; they say that their point of view has made sense to ordinary Christians for sometime but has been roundly ignored by theologians.)

In at least one sense this tendency towards silence is a new response to the challenge being put to theology. Unquestionably each age has felt the need to alter and reinterpret what they say about God in the face of new development, but few who still claimed to be Christians expressed the need to abandon language about God altogether. Yet today the issue often seems to be over whether or not we ought to use the word "God" at all.⁴ Thus the name "Christian-atheists" is not a mislabeling of this point of view. A very serious response to the challenge of positivism has been "non-God-language" theology. However, because of the kinds of misunderstandings which seem inevitably to arise from such a term, we might better refer to them as "linguistic agnostics"; as those who regard the term God as being too problematic to serve a useful purpose in current theological discussion.⁵ The

positivists have charged the theologians with using language which is "meaningless", "out of touch with reality", "emotive", "metaphysical." Those who respond by agreeing with the positivists, but who still want to do theology, have tried to solve the problem by remaining silent about God.

If we are to deal with the adequacy and inadequacy of such a response to the problem of God-language, we must first understand just what it is which is being proposed, and why it holds such a broad appeal. Unlike most theological developments, the "linguistic agnostic" school has a statement which has virtually attained the status of a creed. I think it is fair to say that the vast majority of those who advocate silence with regard to God-language, are willing to take their stand on the basis of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's daring statement in Letters and Papers From Prison (p. 163-164):

So our coming of age forces us to a true recognition of our situation vis a vis God. God is teaching us that we must live as men who can get along very well without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us . . . The God who makes us live in this world without using him as a working hypothesis is the God before whom we are ever standing. Before God and with him we live without God. God allows himself to be edged out of the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he can be with us and help us.

No doubt the great achievement of Bonhoeffer's whole approach to theology was to strongly suggest that it is possible to do theology without ever falling into the problems which the positivists have always told us theology falls into. Furthermore the Bonhoeffer writings have the chance virtue of being cut off at the crucial point of division between the stage of being provocative and that of being systematically descriptive. Bonhoeffer only had time enough before his death to give some indication of the direction in which he might have gone had he lived to continue his work, but there is very little, if any, indication of the solutions which he might have come up with. Thus his work never became synthetic enough to call forth the kind of criticism which it inevitably would have regardless of what solutions he would have enacted. The fascination of Bonhoeffer's suggestion about how to approach theology lies in his reversal of the task of theology as traditionally conceived but at the same time, claiming to do theology. Further, he states that his basis for doing this is the basis upon which every theologian tries to operate; the will of God. We are

facing the God who no longer wishes us to use him as the explanation of or solution to the way things are. He has decreed that we shall outgrow him just as children outgrow their dependancy upon their fathers.

On the basis of such an outlook, Bonhoeffer has become the canon theologian of the "linguistic agnostic" point of view.⁶ I maintain that the reason for Bonhoeffer's great appeal is that he manages to present a responsible position which mediates the extremes of traditional theological Christianity and modern alienated nihilism. It represents a way of doing theology without lapsing into metaphysics. That is what I have suggested previously is the aim of theologians who have become convinced that the attacks upon traditional God-language (J.A.T. Robinson's Honest To God; James Pike's A Time For Christian Candor, et. al.) have exposed for all time the inadequacies of God-language for making sense of the contemporary situation; the situation of "post-copernican", "technological" man. However, most of those who count themselves among the ranks of the linguistic agnostics do not overtly do so as a result

of the challenge of positivism. Most view this outlook as growing out of a much more basic concern than that of academic linguistics. The temptation to give up God-language altogether is presented as a positive rather than a negative activity; as one which shares Bonhoeffer's optimism that the task is commensurate with the will of God. The term which those who share this point of view would apply to themselves would be along the lines of "Christian humanism" and would build upon a Christological basis. The basic question which undergirds the assumptions of this attitude is, "What is Christianity fundamentally about, man or God?" The answer given is, "By God's will, Christianity is fundamentally about man."⁷ This is the basis of the call to cease God-language altogether. God-language is metaphysics; metaphysics is vapid and superstitious; modern technology has dealt the death blow to superstition.⁸

Thus Christian humanism may be seen as a kind of broad theological counterpart to the growth of positivism and of the growing dominance of the scientific method. Talk about God is out for the same reason that emotive language is out and drawing

conclusions intuitively is out. Again, the reason for doing away with such talk is not because it cannot be done (even Robinson and Pike, et. al. admit that they are not wholly free of it), but because we can gain no systematic confidence in it. If language about God is out, language about Jesus remains. The reasons for this are consistent with the general outlook of the linguistic agnostics. Jesus is an "historical" person, within the confines of "concrete" history. It is for this reason that it is possible to draw the conclusion that it is God's will that man no longer use him as a working hypothesis. God has revealed himself most fully through Jesus of Nazareth, the "new man", the "man come of age." It is relatively easy to see the logical construct which leads from the desire for a cessation of language about God, through the crisis of wanting to retain the basic task of theology, to the figure of Jesus as the real significance of mature theological reflection. It seems to me that this logical journey is almost an inevitable result of the point of view represented by the logical positivists as described in the previous chapter. If we can have confidence only in language which functions on one level, the level acknowledged

by the positivists, and if we want to have confidence in our language, then we must use language which functions on that level. That, I suggest, is the linguistic situation in which the linguistic agnostics stand. They have decided that the language traditionally employed by theology to talk about God is inadequately grounded empirically, and therefore God-language is "emotive", "immature", etc. Yet in a significant sense they wish to retain the right to ask the 'ultimate' kinds of questions which they had previously asked in terms of God-language. The solution is to replace the inadequate referent, God (the one which is inadequately grounded empirically), with the adequate referent, Jesus (the one which is historically and therefore empirically grounded.)

I would not want to be guilty of forcing a point of view upon those who wish to cease using God-language with which they do not agree. Undoubtedly many, if not most, of them would object that they do not see their position as a function of the positivists' attacks upon theological language at all (although the arguments which Bishop Robinson uses to attack our spatial notions about God and those

which Bishop Pike uses to attack traditional trinitarian formulation, are largely based upon a positivist view of language). Nevertheless I would maintain that the positions which the linguistic agnostics feel they are furthering are positions which grow out of the same ethos as positivism.

It is of significance that so much of the writing done by the linguistic agnostics is chiefly ethical in its emphasis.⁹ The reason for this is largely the same reason for the rejection of God-language and it is more pragmatic than theological (although it might be that theology, properly understood, is the only truly pragmatic academic discipline). They steadfastly oppose the traditional ethical formulations of Christianity, especially insofar as they have been used to preserve the status quo in bourgeois western society. The following account will serve to illustrate.

Two years ago I heard B. F. Skinner, the noted Harvard behaviorist, give a lecture before a group of theological students. To our surprise we found that Skinner was praising Christianity. However we soon saw why he approved of Christianity.

"Whatever you may decide to do in the course of the theological turmoil which you are now in," he said, "never throw out the doctrines of life after death and of salvation and damnation. They are the greatest behavioral mechanisms ever created." Unquestionably it is that attitude which has contributed most to the impetus presently enjoyed by those who consider themselves linguistic agnostics. The "New" morality is largely a reaction against the defense of middle-class morality on the basis of logically unverifiable truths. The same gardener in Wisdom's parable, who cannot be shown to exist or to not exist, is the one who upheld the morality which best served those who ran the society. In a significant way the ethical concern of this point of view results from the same kind of frustration as does the positivist point of view, only exhibited in a different area. They see the danger of Skinner's remarks lying in the Church's tendency to use God-language to oppose change, to preserve the status quo. The appeal to unverifiable 'metaphysical' reality as the basis for ethical decision making has caused a violent reaction among the linguistic agnostics.¹⁰ They have refused to

become a party to the moralists who claim that God has sanctioned their particular ethical norm. They too see the world in radical flux but they seek to affirm rather than to deny that flux. They see the issue as one of either affirming God-language and denying what is taking place in the world, or of rejecting God-language and affirming what is taking place in the world. They enthusiastically choose the latter.¹¹ Simply put, this is a case of looking to the world for answers to questions rather than to the Church. Of course the people we are considering are largely members of the Church themselves. Nevertheless they have refused to do 'metaphysical ethics' because they have seen that that activity leads to a refusal to deal with the real issues. Just as the positivists claim that theological language has no empirical referent, the linguistic agnostics claim that the ethics of those who appeal to God-language have no empirical referent by which they might be checked against experience. The result is the cessation of God-language for fear of falling into the same trap.

Although I am in total sympathy with the

motives of those who wish to cease using God-language altogether, they seem by their solution to have "thrown out the baby with the bath water." No doubt God-language has often been appealed to in order to uphold old, irrelevant solutions to problems, and to that extent I share the wishes of the linguistic agnostics. It seems to me a wholly good thing that language about a God who guards the interests of the establishment in upholding victorian morality, should be challenged and done away with. However all language about God cannot be abandoned without the simultaneous abandonment of the task of theolgy. Even those who sharply challenge the language traditionally employed by theology recognize the absolute necessity for some kind of God-language. Writes William Hamilton, "Yet if there is to be Christian understanding of God, if there is to be theology at all, we must prefer unwise speaking to prudent silence."¹² And van Buren, "No wonder Bonhoeffer's question (How do we speak in a secular fashion of God) bothers us. It reminds us of two incontrovertible facts. The first is that the biblical faith, unlike Buddhism, for example, must speak of God . . . A God to whom

human words cannot point is not the God of the Bible."¹³

If we are to reject God-language, we must reject theology. No doubt the wish to avoid the obscurity which seems to characterize the formulations of those who use God-language is a noble one. Similarly the impatience with the stiffness of authoritarian ethics deriving from a 'metaphysical' author is one which I share. Nevertheless, I am sure that to attempt to solve the problem by refusing to use God-language at all is the wrong solution. As Christians we are grounded in the witness of the Old and the New Testaments and nothing would be more ludicrous than to suggest that the God of the Scriptures was one about whom it is impossible to use language. I agree that the basic character of the world is that it is constantly changing, and it is also true that theology has often played a stalling role in the face of that change, but that is a faulty understanding of God's activity rather than an inherent weakness of the descriptive task of theology. God is the Lord of the world and therefore is the Lord of the constant change which takes place in the world. The basic unalterable proposition of the Judaeo-Christian position is that God has intimately involved himself

in our history; therefore a Christian's description of the world and of its history will necessarily include God-language. I would characterize the proposition laid down by Bonhoeffer and picked up by all the linguistic agnostics,¹⁴ as one which does not evolve from the Judaeo-Christian view of God and of his relation to his creation, but is a proposition which runs directly counter to the most basic understanding which that view takes of God's continuing activity in the world.

Once again, just as at the end of the first chapter, we are faced with the necessity for God-language if we are to do Christian theology. Previously we have dealt with the inadequacies of maintaining a single level view of reality and of our language about reality. Now we see the failure of an outgrowth of that view, the temptation to give up God-language about God. Therefore the problem of this thesis remains: how can we conceive of our language in such a way as to have confidence that it expresses what we want to express? To the solution of that problem we now turn.

FOOTNOTES

1 - Although I hope that the rest of the chapter will make clear my right to make such a statement, I am afraid I have not the right to make it without any comment here. I would maintain that this is the case with most of those who are being lumped together under the aegis of the "New Theology." I take that to include people like William Hamilton, J.A.T. Robinson, Harvey Cox, Paul van Buren, Werner Pelz, etc. There is really no basis for lumping all of those people together because they are hardly representative of a single point of view or of a single view of their task. But there is one thing which pulls them together; that is the feeling that traditional theology is inadequate for present problems and must look in new directions if it is to speak responsibly in the present situation. In other words, as is so often the case, I think that while these people frequently disagree on solutions, they agree very much on the problem. Very simply put, they see the problem as the inadequacy of theology, as traditionally conceived, in dealing with the problems posed by present existence.

2 - I know that the "New Theology" is not simply a result of the growth of positivism. However, I am convinced, and I think there is ample academic support for this view, that positivism is the philosophical agenda of a vast and broad point of view which is indeed the source of the problems raised by the "New Theology."

3 - The reasons would be the subject of a fascinating study. Probably the recent rise of linguistic philosophy as a respectable part of the philosophical enterprise, would comprise the biggest reason. However the intricacies of inter-disciplinary dialogues, with

the conclusions of one discipline having a profound affect upon the activities of another, is much too subtle a cultural phenomenon to pursue here. Nevertheless, that such is the case today is not difficult to demonstrate. "He [a scientist upon hearing me talk] had shown me further that in a secular age one may not assume that language about God affords a universally intelligible starting point for an interpretation of the Christian faith." (New Theology No. 2, art. by John Macquarrie, "How is Theology Possible?" pps. 21-33).

4 - "So conditioned for us is the word 'God' by associations with a being out there that Tillich warns us that to make the necessary transposition, 'you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself.'" (Honest To God, p. 47)

5 - This, of course, is what the "Death of God" theology is really all about. It has nothing whatever to do with the demise of the Creator, but is concerned lest our language about that Creator be out of touch with the contemporary situation.

6 - Once again, I want to make absolutely clear the fact that I am not referring to a particular "school" of writers. The "linguistic agnostic" point of view refers to an attitude which one can take towards the problems posed for God-language by positivism, but the taking of such an attitude does not confine one to any particular "school" of theology.

7 - Says van Buren: "I am trying to raise a more important issue: whether or not Christianity is fundamentally about God or about man. That is, putting it rather sharply, I am trying to argue that it is fundamentally about man, that its language about God is one way - a dated way among a number of ways - of saying

what it is Christianity wants to say about man and human life and human history." (From "The New Yorker" 11-13-65, article by Ved Mehta p. 153)

8 - "If, then, it is already so difficult to transcend metaphysics by talking the 'step back' to the essence of metaphysics, there is every reason, Heidegger says, to remain provisionally silent about God. Because traditional thinking about God is metaphysics and metaphysics must be transcended, man's thinking is not yet able to indicate what the term 'God' means." (Phenomenology and Metaphysics p. 171)

"Most of us are learning to accept these things: the disappearance of God from the world, the coming of age of the world, as it has been called [by Bonhoeffer], the disappearance of religion as a lively factor in modern life, the fact that there are men who can live both without God and without despair. We are coming to accept these calmly as events not without their advantages. Perhaps our calmness will disappear when we face the possibility that God will even more decisively withdraw - that he will withdraw from our selves as he has already withdrawn from the world, that not only has the world become sheer world but that self will become sheer self." (The New Essence of Christianity p. 66)

"We speak of God to secular man by speaking about man, by talking about man as he is seen in the biblical perspective. Secular talk of God occurs only when we are away from the ghetto and out of the costume, when we are participants in that political action by which He restores men to each other in mutual concern and responsibility . . . There have always been important similarities between biblical faith and atheism, as contrasted, for example, to belief in demons and spirits. But in our time this similarity has produced a rather novel heresy. It is a kind of atheism expressed in Christian theological terminology." (The Secular City p. 257)

9 - Two works in particular point this up; Pierre Berton's The Comfortable Pew and Harvey Cox's The Secular

City. Further, I would say that those works which are not as specifically ethical (Hamilton's The New Essence of Christianity, van Buren's The Secular Meaning of the Gospel), regard themselves as clearing the board of the theological problems which are in the way of mature ethical decision making. This might be backed up by the fact that Robinson (Honest To God), once he has dealt with what he regards as the theological problems, then writes a chapter on the 'New Morality.'

10 - We have all had first-hand experiences of this kind of pristine morality. I was in a Rector's office one day a couple of years ago and he told me of a young college girl he had been counseling. She had been sleeping with a boy and was upset over it. She felt that she loved him but was not yet ready for marriage and could not seem to make a decision about what to do. She said that she could see no 'logical' reason for not sleeping with the boy. The Rector told me that he looked her square in the eye and said, "Mary, you know why you shouldn't sleep with that boy? You shouldn't sleep with him because God doesn't want you to; that's why." He went on to tell me that, much to his surprise, she got up and left his office in a huff and never came back. "There's no fear of the Lord in kids these days," he said to me.

11 - Says Pierre Burton (Comfortable Pew p. 125): "For this New Age we need a new kind of Church. The mentality of the New Age is secular, not religious, and any Church that survives and flourishes and reaches the hearts and souls of men must be aware of this. Religion, if it ever was intended to be confined within four Gothic or baroque walls, certainly can no longer remain there . . .

Religion as we know it, as distinct from Christianity, is, in my opinion, coming to an end, in spite of present evidences of its power. And Christianity, if it is to survive as a meaningful faith and ethic, must rid itself of religious trappings and false goals. It has been my observation that, just as many 'religious' people are not really Christians, so many

others, for whom Christianity is genuinely the clue to life and conduct, do not need or want what is called 'religion' in the New Age. They reject it as Bonhoeffer rejected it, and it angers them that the establishment should require of them that they be 'religious' before they can be called Christians."

12 - Hamilton, The New Essence of Christianity
p. 40.

13 - van Buren, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel
p. 241.

14 - As quoted previously in Letter and Papers
From Prison.

CHAPTER III

THE WITHSTANDING OF TEMPTATIONS: THE LIFE OF LANGUAGE AND THE DEPTH OF REALITY

"Thus many people are, in fact, even without being exactly aware of it, in dialogue with God; and that not only at the culminating point of confessing, which we have chosen in order to see more clearly what is happening; but every time that their scale of values is called in question in the inner struggle, every time a man makes a reference to a standard of beauty, goodness, and truth."

Paul Tournier The Meaning Of Persons p. 160

By this point it should be clear that I am dealing with only one basic attack upon theological language, but it is one which manifests itself in multifarious ways. The reason why I have chosen to deal only with that one attack (positivism) is that I have a firm conviction that it is at the very heart of all the problems which contemporary people have with the task of theology. Chapter One dealt with the actual content of positivism, a philosophical position which has been fairly well chipped away at on the professional, academic level.¹ Nevertheless, as the second chapter tried to demonstrate, the principles and assumptions undergirding the positivist position are far from dead among those who function on different levels from the linguistic philosopher. I tried to show that the assumptions which inform those who regard Bonhoeffer as their canon theologian are, in many respects, those of the positivists. We are now at the point where it is appropriate to

deal with the model of reality which leads the positivist and the linguistic agnostic to take the positions which they take. For my thesis will rest ultimately upon the proposition that what is at stake is a construct of reality and the linguistic problem grows organically out of that construct.

Once Immanuel Kant had made a distinction between the real world which is unknowable and the proximate world which is knowable,² the handwriting was on the wall with respect to what theology and theological language were going to have to face. It was a religious understanding of reality which first fostered such a distinction³ and it was religion which had to pay the price. Without tracing all the history which intervened, it is easy to see what inevitably was to result when science began to transform men's philosophic interest from the academic and theoretical to the pragmatic. If the real world is unknowable then they will manage with the proximate world which is knowable. That, I propose, is what occurred philosophically, linguistically and theologically. We might diagram it thus:

proximate-knowable vs. real-unknowable

empirical vs. metaphysical

secular vs. religious

Jesus vs. God

Each of the last three antipodes take the Kantian problem very seriously. The split is a result in every case of the refusal to undertake metaphysics seriously and the reason for that refusal is that everyone is aware that there can be no hope of certainty in metaphysics since its realm is essentially unknowable. Positivism is simply this model imposed upon the whole of reality and linguistic agnosticism is the attempt to locate real meaning in the proximate world about which certainty may be gained. Undoubtedly the apparent certainty which can be gained by steadfastly refusing to speculate upon the "real, unknowable", and all which falls under it, is the attractive feature of both positivism and of linguistic agnosticism. The appeal to the methods and assumptions of science is so pervasive a part of the contemporary scene that we do not stop to question it.⁴ I see no way of refuting the notion that this stance towards the

world grows directly out of Kant's proposal about the nature of reality. In fact it might be possible to show that one of the most common objections to religion in general is simply a kind of mirror image of Kant's model. "The trouble with religion," we are told, "is that you have to have faith, to believe." That statement is intended to contrast with the cognitive process which comes under the canon of man's reason. Religion, this view goes, is asking us to believe something of which we can never have a direct experience of any sort. Thus there are two kinds of reality, the knowable and the unknowable, and the religious question becomes, "What do you make of the latter?" When it is put that way, it is not difficult to understand why people are wary of religious language; of language which is about a realm outside of our experience. There is, I contend, the same sort of dynamic at work on the popular level which is operative professionally in linguistic philosophy. But the less "sophisticated" popular presentation of it is, "I only believe what I can see; I take nothing on faith. Therefore I am not religious." I believe that is equivalent to the position of the positivist who says that language which does not function on a

particular level (the one discussed in Chapter One) is meaningless. I think this is certainly the reason that the most devastating argument which can be used against a point of view today is that it is not scientific. Put as simply as possibly, this point of view is "I do not talk about anything which I cannot experience sensually."

The most basic problem with the above view of reality is that it is not true, and I make that statement not on the basis of some model of reality, but rather on the experience of people and of their language. The error does not lie with the positivists or with the linguistic agnostics but rather with the picture of reality which has come down to us from Kant and which positivists and linguistic agnostics have tried to press unilaterally upon every experience which everyone ever has of reality (with the possible exception of the mystics). The problem is that Kant's presentation of the two kinds of worlds (which was altogether appropriate for the problems with which he was faced) has been taken on as the final word about the nature of reality, and everything subsequent is presented in the light of it. The positivists and the

linguistic agnostics are the people who have done the obvious task given the assumptions about reality. But I wish to suggest that the Kantian picture of the world, which leads those who take it seriously to make something of the separation between the knowable and the unknowable, is not the picture which forms the basis for the activity of most men's lives. Rather than try to build a tight philosophical case for this I shall briefly present the experience of one man whose career I regard as a model of the possibility for the evolution of attitudes towards language.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951)⁵ had a fierce impact upon linguistic philosophy when, at a very young age, he published Tractatus Logico - Philosophicus. Briefly and simply put, the thesis which Wittgenstein advanced in the Tractatus was that the world divides into facts and ultimately into a uniquely determined set of atomic facts. And each proposition ultimately resolves itself, by analysis, into one uniquely determined truth function of elementary propositions. Thus each proposition has one and only one final analysis. Now, I am less

concerned with the particulars of Wittgenstein's thesis than I am with the circumstances of his career, but it should be said that the Tractatus was regarded by many to be the most brilliant thing ever to have been done in linguistic philosophy. Obviously Wittgenstein regarded the Tractatus as the drawing of logical conclusions to the assumptions of post-Kantian thought, and that is precisely what it was. The point which I am most interested in making here, however, is that in the course of ruminating upon his conclusions, Wittgenstein came to realize their total inadequacy vis a vis their lack of contact with the way people really use language. The results of his changes of mind are clearly evident in The Philosophical Investigations which is virtually a repudiation of his earlier position. He came to feel that the source of what he called the "philosophical puzzlement" was largely due to a misconception about language. Philosophers seem to think that ordinary language is like an exact calculus and that there are definite rules which it always strictly follows. This may lead them to think that every word can be given a precise definition which gives the meaning of the word whenever it appears. The trouble is, of course,

that most words do not have a perfectly precise meaning. Wittgenstein writes of the philosopher's (and the theologian's) "craving for unity" which drives him to seek unity in diversity, sameness in difference, the one in the many. Left unchecked, this craving for unity would seek to find a single function common to all individual words and a single function common to all sentences. Wittgenstein realized that the kind of things which he had concluded in the Tractatus had very little to do with the way people really behave. Rather they resulted from his craving for unity which led him to posit pictures of reality which were confining. (Thus if I think of the mind as a kind of theater, then as long as I am guided by this picture, the things I can say or think about the mind will be limited to that sort of thing that can sensibly be said of theaters.) The philosophers' (and the theologians') problem comes from his tendency to take pictures embedded in ordinary language too seriously, to push the analogies too far. There is nothing wrong with having pictures as is evidenced by the fact that ordinary men have them and experience no intellectual problems, but philosophers tend to push them too far. Wittgenstein found himself freed from the

restraints of his earlier position by the insight that individual words and sentences do not function in only one way, nor even in a small number of ways, but in a great variety of ways. Then the grammatical similarities amongst different sentences found in ordinary language are no longer such a threat to the philosopher. He no longer takes it for granted that identical grammatical features entail identical kinds of meanings or uses. But perhaps the most significant insight which helped to change Wittgenstein's mind was that ordinary language was not designed with the philosopher's special interests in mind. Its purpose is to allow human beings to communicate with one another for many different kinds of activities. And for these purposes, ordinary language is quite adequate. Thus Wittgenstein had turned 180 degrees from his original position. The element which I would like to draw attention to is his basis for doing what he did. He allowed his experience of reality to permeate and inform his philosophic construct of reality. The result was that he saw a vast gap between the two. That left him to choose between the two; between his philosophical system and his experience. He chose the latter. The problem with

the univocal view of language is that it does not reflect our experience of reality.

Perhaps an example will demonstrate the process which Wittgenstein underwent: We have already seen the tendency to insist that words which function alike grammatically in a sentence are equivalent. This seems a perfectly reasonable axiom, but let us try to make sense of it in experience. Two sentences: There is a table in this room; There is nothing in this room. Clearly the two words "table" and "nothing" function in exactly the same way in the two sentences; do we then insist that they are equivalent? Do we have to say that "nothing" has an existence (essence) because its grammatical equivalent, "table" can be shown to exist? Certainly not. The point is that language functions in many different kinds of ways and we need neither give up using the word "nothing" because we cannot conceive of its being grounded the same way "table" is, nor posit for "nothing" an existence because it seems to function like "table" which does exist.

The point is that language is a functional activity which grows out of the life of man. The

question which has to be asked is, "Was language made for man, or man for language?" and my thesis rests upon the former being true. What is language for? Why, to communicate what we think is real. Language has no existence apart from the social, "family" activities of human beings and therefore any notion about the nature of language is also a notion about those activities. Thus it can be said that the problem is not really language at all but the life of people which language reflects. In a significant way, the insights which were gained by Wittgenstein when he began to place his philosophical thinking alongside his experience, can be broadened beyond where Wittgenstein took them. His work in linguistics helped to expose the fact that, in one sense, the problem is not a linguistic problem at all. Probably the real source of the problem lies in the fact that the language has no context in which to dwell. The problem with theological language which imparts the dimension of depth and significance to reality, is a problem which grows out of a posture towards life.⁶ All those who view the problem which religion faces today as being one of outdated language (as I suggest bishops Pike and Robinson do) really have a naive

view of the problem. The language which we use to describe our religious words certainly does not give meaning to them. If the words did not already have meaning then there would be little point in laboring over them for it would be absurd to suppose that further elaboration of them was going to give them meaning.

If we believe that Wittgenstein is right, as I do, about the fantastic complexity of experience and therefore of the way in which language about that experience functions, then it would seem that to ask for a detailed definition of all our language is a ridiculous request. In order to really compile an accurate account of the meanings for every form of speech, we would have to have an absolutely accurate and exhaustive reading, not only of everything which the person is question experienced as real in the world, but also his whims, his passions, etc. Because we can never gain such accurate information, some find our understanding fragmentary and despair of the possibility of a really empirical study. But we do not give meanings to language by thinking abstract correlatives but rather by making language

take on its own life, by making it work as hard and as thoroughly as we can. As we have seen from Wittgenstein, language can only be understood in terms of its function; words gain meanings only when their role is given. If there is no role, and this is the real problem which God-language faces, then the words themselves drop away. The kind of philosophical perplexity which men cause for themselves when trying to find unitive explanations and formulations for things, also plagues those who are insecure about God-language today. We must begin to regard the actual workings of the speech forms, the functions which words perform. When they are put to work in their proper contexts, the meanings usually simply appear. If the concepts which the words attempt to convey no longer have any meaning, it is because they have no life, and that is because people no longer have confidence in the realities which the language existed to convey. As Paul Holman says, "To lose the meaning of religious words is not like losing definitions - it is more like losing the practise with which they were associated."⁷ I have already set forth in the terms of the Kantian categories of reality the basic things which I believe

have caused the loss of confidence. Clearly the problem is partly one of being able to trust our perceptions.⁸ The first and perhaps most subtle problem is to somehow sidestep the categories which Kant imposed upon us. It would of course be historically obscurantist to ignore the categories (although that would be fine with me if we could) and so what is important is to discredit them as the best form of organizing reality. If we are to have any confidence in our theological language, it is my conviction that we are going to have to overturn the notion of the real and unknowable. We are going to have to be converted to the idea that nature and spirit, mind and body, are not inhabitants of different realms which must be contrasted and set over against each other, but are coordinate functions of the same organism.

Nothing would be more inappropriate than to presume to effect a synthetic solution to the problem at this point. That would be the historical equivalent of expecting the Wright brothers to precede Newton. It is for that reason that I think that the proponents of the New Theology are correct

in belittling the attempts of present day theologians to be systematic.⁹ I feel sure that we are in a period which will bridge the gap between the old Kantian view of reality and a new view and it is certainly not clear yet what form the new view will take. Paul van Buren's book (The Secular Meaning of the Gospel) is typical of the problem. His analysis of the problem which religious language faces is excellent but the moment he attempts to produce a solution he is woefully inadequate.

Nevertheless there are certain things which we can point to and which surely mark the course which the linguistic situation will follow for the next several years. There are people who are writing things which, when they have had time to have a real impact, will unquestionably revolutionize our understanding of the nature of reality and the language which flows from that understanding. (It may or may not be significant that, by and large, the best work is being done by those who do not consider themselves bound by the perimeters of theology.) The first thing which ought to be pointed to is so obvious that we generally miss it completely. Wittgenstein has

pointed to it but it does not yet seem to have made any impact. That is the fact that in ordinary situations people use language which does not satisfy the requirements of either the positivists or of the linguistic-agnostics and yet which seems to serve perfectly adequately. Sometimes this fact can be demonstrated with crystal clarity in seemingly unlikely places. Recently I came across an article (New York Times Sunday Magazine Section, December 19, 1965) entitled "Muffled Voice of Russian Liberalism" which was written by Deming Brown and which was about Novy Mir, the Russian magazine which has become famous as the journal which will publish the more liberal writers. One of the questions to which the article addressed itself was "How can Novy Mir get away with real criticism in a state which does not tolerate dissent?" The answer lies in the way which that criticism is carried out.

As a literary magazine, Novy Mir devotes about two-thirds of its space to fiction, poetry and criticism. To those familiar with the tradition of the Russian 'thick journal' it is not surprising that a magazine so devoted to esthetic matters should be so heavily freighted with political significance. Imaginative literature in Russia has always been a major vehicle of social concern and a medium in which many ideological battles of transcendent importance have been fought.

Russian writers have traditionally used poetry and fiction to advance ideas that would be too dangerous to outline in other contexts. Thus in Novy Mir and other Soviet magazines, literature very frequently takes on the dimensions of political and social metaphor. (p. 32)

The fascinating thing is to ponder the significance of such a situation in light of the official ideology of the country involved. Russia is a country which is dedicated, at least officially, to that notion of reality which is championed by the positivists. Communism, in dialectical materialism, claims to have founded a purely "positivistic" interpretation of history. Therefore language which does not conform to that base, as poetic language for instance does not, is language which Communism is ideologically bound to regard as insignificant. Yet the fact that Novy Mir is the most powerful, significant, and sought after journal in Russia belies the official ideology. The fact is (which Novy Mir's editors make of great advantage) that poetic language is indeed of very great significance regardless of any positivist ideology to the contrary.

It is equally simple to expose the inadequacy of Bishop Robinson's charge that spatial lang-

uage about God is inappropriate in a post-copernican age. We all use spatial language in our everyday activities without its seeming to become insignificant. We speak of "deep" meaning, of "higher" education, "deep-seated" neuroses, "high" church; the list could go on indefinitely. Spatial terminology has shown itself to be immensely useful when used to convey degree of significance and no one seems to be plagued by the fact that the terms are not being used in an exact one to one relation to their spatial meanings. That is the perplexity which occurs only when we try to push a term further than it is usefully able to be pushed. Yet it would be impossible to stress too much the significance of the fact that people in ordinary situations use language with ease which would be outrageous on the basis of any positivist view. We need only to read a book review or a review of a play or concert to know that language which positivists dismiss as emotive or which others say is inadequately grounded, is very often the only language which can illuminate an artistic event.¹⁰

It is only in the self-conscious situation of academic linguistics, when we discover that we cannot make certain kinds of language conform to our fixed precon-

ceptions, that we lose confidence in the ability of that language to communicate significantly.

Unquestionably the chief thing which is needed for the restoration of confidence in language about God, depth language, is the understanding that language is an activity which grows out of the process of living and being. Language is not an event which can be isolated from its context and studied as if it had an independent existence. Therefore we face the necessity of a restoration of confidence in the dimension of reality to which depth language points. What we must understand is that there are not really two different languages which we can call "language-as-poetry" and "language-as-science",¹¹ one of which is more "empirical" than the other. Language is poetry, conceptualization which formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience. But we have come to believe that there is another kind of language, not figurative, but literal and logical. For years we have tried to purify our language, to rid it of myth and poetry. The rejection of language-as-poetry has brought an affirmation of language-as-science with its rejection of mythological or

metaphoric or poetic as emotive, imprecise, symbolical and metaphysical. Yet science cannot be set against poetry because they are structurally similar activities. Mathematics cannot be set against words because each is an instrument for myth in the mind. They are not different types of activities but two different forms of the same activity. They are two different models to impose upon reality, two different sets of glasses through which to gaze at the world.¹² They are activities which occur (sometimes simultaneously) within the same person. Yet we suppose that human beings are capable of two sorts of thinking, the logical and the imaginative, and what we realize when we throw out Kant's categories, is that even the logical is imaginative. As Elizabeth Sewall says;

Science and poetry, mathematics and words, intellect and imagination, mind and body: they are old, they are tidy, they are mistaken . . . We have given ourselves credit, as human beings, for rather more or rather less than we possess. The human organism, that body which has the gift of thought, / my underlining / does not have the choice of two kinds of thinking. It has only one, in which the organism as a whole is engaged all along the line.¹³

To describe a person as "that body which has the gift of thought," is to be rid of the categories of Kant.

In both science and poetry discovery is a mythological situation in which the mind unites with a figure of its own choosing as a means of grasping reality and that figure must finally take linguistic shape. A word means the mental activity which it stimulates just as much as it means the object to which it refers. The subject-object relationship cannot be analytically broken down in language. The active participation of the user of the language is part of the nature of language itself.

. . . you cannot tell the dancer from the dance. Now one point at least can be cleared up, for it is in this field that the antithesis we have been talking about belong, all five of them: science/poetry; analysis/synthesis; mathematics/words; intellect/imagination; mind/body. On this dancing ground they are not fixed and opposing marks, but moving and interchanging figures of the dance we call thinking and knowing. They are not to be melted into a hodgepodge of sameness - that was not what was meant by saying they were, as antithesis, useless - for clearly in one sense science is not poetry, mathematics is not words, and so on. They are to be seen as a choice of operations of the dancing mind by which it can learn to understand itself and the world. The image of dancing is a good one here because it prevents us from thinking that this process is an abstract one in which the body is not essentially and passionately involved. 14

Thus we are fundamentally mistaken to regard language-as-science as being more true or more factual than

language-as-poetry.

Finally, I fully grant the positivist premise that what is needed is language which is empirically grounded. But I regard that premise as nothing more than a call for language which grows out of our experience of reality; a rejection of speculative language about the way things might be ordered in the "real-unknowable" world. It is my passionate hope that we are nearing a kind of religious maturity which acknowledges and rejects those things. Yet I would undoubtedly wish to broaden the term "empirical" to refer to the totality of our experience, rather than its being narrowed to subject-object relationships in which the object can always be verified by one of the five senses. I regard the broadening of the term "empirical" not as a call to reorganize our understanding of things in any fundamental way, but rather as an invitation to believe our experience, our total experience. It is not modesty which prevents me from being synthetic and definitive about the solution which we can effect at this point in time; I am convinced that it is simply impossible to do so. Yet I am equally convinced that

the possibility of having confidence in language about God is presently being hinted at in ways which demonstrate very specifically the direction which any solution is going to have to take. Just as language is not a separate essence with its own existence apart from the business of life, so the issues about God are active and about life rather than passive and speculative. The problem is that we have been fooled into believing that ideas and language about God involve speculation about whether or not a "Great Power" actually exists in the real, unknowable world. That is not the biblical question, it is not the religious question, and it is not the linguistic question. When Moses asks God to reveal his name to him (Exodus 3:13 & 14), God gives him a form of the verb "to be" which means, "I cause to happen what I cause to happen" or "I choose to do what I choose to do." We are not dealing with a speculative problem of God's existence but with the question of what we shall do in response to God's activity. We must be finished with the notion that the test of truth is to decide systematically beforehand what constitute the categories of truth and then to apply them. We must decide that truth consists of catching sight of reality

as it gives itself to be known. Then we shall be prepared to recover what has been lost in the Western Tradition (and which people like Polanyi and Sewell and Tillich are trying to restore) which is awe at the very fact that things are - that there are things at all, rather than there being nothing. Once we become again convicted of the awe of being confronted by our daily existence, then we shall begin to regain confidence in our language about God. We shall realize that religious language is not an attempt to bridge the gap between the world of things and the world of spirit, but an attempt to give expression to the majesty of the One who confronts us in the world.

FOOTNOTES

1 - " . . . as for the verification principle, time has turned against the logical positivists." Hartnack, Wittgenstein And Modern Philosophy, p. 56. I have not found anyone who does not feel that pure positivism was not over zealous in the pushing of its criteria upon language.

2 - I recognize the Cartesian nature of this dilemma and I do not wish to become embroiled in a controversy on the history of philosophy. I would hope that anyone would grant that, regardless of how far back we might wish to locate the roots of Kant's thinking, that it was Kant who really set out the problem with which all modern philosophy feels constrained to deal.

3 - The problem of how the transcendent and ineffable God realted to his creation plagued philosophy from its inception. Kant's solution seemed to be a way to lend credence to man's ability to reason while taking account of the God who was above reason. Later in the chapter we will see that this is a result of what Wittgenstein calls the problem of the philosopher's becoming a captive of his own pictures. But Kant did not have the benefit of Wittgenstein's thought.

4 - I think this is relatively easy to document but in the interest of conforming to the method which I am promoting in this paper, I appeal to experience. Have we not all heard remarks such as, "This is really

very unscientific, but I think . . . ?" Everyone is interested in what kinds of intuitions and thoughts people have but they like to think that they would only make decisions based on "scientific" data which is somehow innately more valid and trustworthy than human perception. Of course, I do not think people really behave that way at all, but they like to think they do.

5 - I do not wish to present a discussion of the thought of Wittgenstein at this point. Due to space limitations I shall assume a certain familiarity with his ideas. For those who are not familiar, I refer to the works of Wittgenstein on the bibliography and I especially recommend two books about Wittgenstein, Hartnack's Wittgenstein And Modern Philosophy and George Pitcher's The Philosophy Of Wittgenstein. The reader will have no difficulty recognizing my dependence upon the latter for my presentation of Wittgenstein. I wish to stress that I am not interested in doing a systematic explanation of Wittgenstein. I only wish to point to him as a model which hopefully demonstrates my point.

6 - In an article in The Harvard Theological Review (July, 1965), entitled "Language And Theology", Paul L. Holman does battle with the notion that what is needed is a revision of our language in theology. His conclusions about experience and our desire to unify and simplify our conceptualization of experience are highly reminiscent of Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations. "My inclination" writes Holman (p. 253) "is to view current theological desires for conceptual systems as largely a consequence of a mistaken view of language. In contrast to the mistaken view, there seems to me to be no single view of language even possible . . . " It is a most provocative article and the reader should realize that much of the thinking represented at this point was stimulated by Holman's ideas.

7 - Harvard Theological Review (vol. 58, no. 13)
July 1965, "Language And Theology" p. 260

8 - I think this is probably where the thinking of Paul Tillich has been of such great significance. There is almost no doubt that what he regarded his writing and preaching as doing was to point out to people what they already had perceived and to tell them that they had every reason to have confidence in their perceptions. In a review of James Luther Adam's Paul Tillich's Philosophy Of Culture, Science, And Religion (New York Times, February 13, 1966), John Macquerrie writes; "Mr. Adams writes: 'To speak of depth is highly characteristic of Tillich. Instead of looking up from reality, he prefers to look down through it.' These words come very near to expressing what was essential in Tillich's outlook. Modern man has largely lost the sense of a transcendent dimension above or beyond him. But Tillich rightly believed that without an awareness of the transcendent life becomes superficial and empty. He tried to open up for us again the dimensions of the transcendent and the holy but he urged us to look for these realities not outside of this world but in the depths that lie within it." (p. 14)

9 - "I suspect that we have come to a time when theology should try to give up its structural pretensions and be content with not much more than a collection of fragments or images, not too precisely related to each other, indirectly rather than directly put forth. This structural suggestion has not commended itself to many in our time, for ours is a day of confidence, of the intellectual offensive; large books; dogmatic and philosophical theology; word study and exegesis." (Wm. Hamilton, The New Essences Of Christianity p. 13) Sometimes the New Theologians sound downright anti-intellectual although I do not think they are; rather they are anti-systematic.

10 - There is simply not enough space in a

study of this kind to look into all the corners which I would like to. One of the things which fascinates me and which would make an exciting study of its own is the technical vocabulary of psychiatry. I think such a study would reveal two things which would be extremely damaging to the positions of the positivists and of the linguistic agnostics. The first is that there is no more "empirical" language than that which is used in psychiatry which would function any better given the aims of the psychiatrist. The second thing which I think it would show is that people are motivated by things which are non-'empirical.' In other words psychiatry dissolves the extremely rational premise on which positivism operates.

11 - The terms "language-as-poetry" and "language-as-science" are direct steals from Elizabeth Sewell (The Orphic Voice). I would not say that the thinking in this paragraph is a straightforward paraphrase of Sewell, but it is true that I could not have written the paragraph if I had not read The Orphic Voice.

12 - This jibes with what R. M. Hare calls a "blik." A "blik" is a way of looking at the world, a fundamental attitude about the way things are. A "blik" is not achieved by empirical inquiry. The basic presuppositions we have about the world are not verifiable, and yet everything we do depends on them (a la Hume).

13 - Elizabeth Sewell, The Orphic Voice p. 19

14 - op. cit. p. 25

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